

The Defending of a Nation: The Founding Years at the Chicago Defender

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Would you start your life over based on the urgings of a newspaper? Robert S. Abbot had this control, this influence on an entire race. “The power of the media is, and was often underestimated, but can be domineering,” declared a web site about the *Chicago Defender*. Abbot took the notion that a good newspaper was one of the strongest weapons to be used in defense of a race deprived of its citizenship rights. Therefore, Abbot founded the *Chicago Defender*, the most prominent and influential black newspaper in the country. As the name implies, the paper defended an entire race from discrimination and segregation.

Publishing out of a small kitchen in his landlord’s apartment, Robert S. Abbot began his journalistic enterprise in 1905 with an initial investment of twenty-five dollars and a press run of 300 copies. “The first issues of the *Defender* were four paged, six column handbills which were filled with local news gathered by Abbot and clippings from Chicago newspapers.” The papers were sold door-to-door by Abbot for twenty five cents a copy.

In 1910, Abbot hired his first employee, J. Hockley Smiley. Smiley freely borrowed journalism techniques and converted the *Chicago Defender* from a boilerplate sheet to the first modern black newspaper. He gradually incorporated yellow journalism during his five years with the paper in order to boost sales and to dramatize many racial injustices in America.

Smiley's method included extravagant headlines, dramatic articles, graphic images, militant editorials, and satirical cartoons, all of which appealed not only to well educated northern blacks but to blacks located throughout the country. The *Defender's* numbers reached 230,000 in circulation, and by World War I, two-thirds of the paper's readers were based outside of Chicago. In terms of impact on society and culture of African Americans, author Roi Ottley wrote, "The *Chicago Defender* was second to only one other piece of literature, the Bible."

By the time of Smiley's death in 1915, the *Defender* was already the largest African American paper in Chicago and was well on its way to becoming the largest African- American-owned business in the country. The paper was "audaciously proclaiming itself 'the World's Greatest Newspaper' and was becoming the first Negro newspaper in history with a mass circulation."

As a northern paper, the *Chicago Defender* had more freedom to safely report stories that southern black papers could not, for fear of white retribution and retaliation. "The *Defender* exposed the daily horrors that characterized the racist south, including police brutality, lynching, and white economic exploitation of the disfranchised black population," according to a web site on the newspaper.

Defiant statements earned the *Chicago Defender* intense loyalty among "racemen" and "racewomen," which African Americans were called in the paper. It also invoked antipathy among southern whites who sought to prohibit its distribution and sales. White distributors refused to circulate the *Defender*, and many racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan tried to confiscate or threaten the paper's readers. The newspaper had to be smuggled across the Mason-Dixon Line. The *Defender* was read aloud in local

parks, churches, and barbershops and passed from person to person. It is estimated as its height that each paper sold was read by four or five blacks, placing the newspaper's readership at over 500,000 each week, making it the first black newspaper with a readership over 100,000.

Abbot believed he had a duty to influence racemen to migrate North. The *Chicago Defender* published and encouraged the migration resulting in over one and half million southern blacks. "This epoch is known as the Great Migration, during which the *Chicago Defender* influenced . . . more than 110,000 southern blacks to come to the city of Chicago alone, nearly tripling the city's black population," according to one web site.

The *Chicago Defender* declared May 15, 1917, as the date of the Great Northern Drive. The paper "portrayed stark contrast between northern freedoms and southern tyranny," according to historian Allan Spear. Images of the best northern schools were shown adjacent to the worst southern schools. Articles describing the horrendous conditions of the lives of southern blacks were paired with those of comfort and luxury lifestyles in the North. The *Defender* pulled racemen north by organizing clubs that provided lower rail fares, directing new migrants to jobs, and providing housing and social services.

The *Chicago Defender* captured the transportation troubles of the black labor recruits, who were restricted to riding in coal cars, by publishing this poem, "Some are coming on passenger, some are coming on freight, others will be found walking for none have time to wait." In retaliation, white southerns told blacks they would freeze to death in the North. Responding, the *Defender* compiled a list of blacks that were found frozen

to death in the South, and asked “If you can freeze to death in the north and be free, and why freeze to death in the south and be a slave?”

“Chicago was a focal point of the great migration and of the racial violence that came in its wake,” Spears wrote. The *Chicago Defender* provided fine coverage of the Red Summer Riots of 1919, a time of racism, lynchings, and chaos in cities throughout the country.

According to one reporter for the *Chicago Defender*, 38 people were killed and over 500 people, black and white, were injured. The race riots began on July 27, 1919, when a few whites began hurling rocks at some blacks on the beach. For five days white gangs beat, stabbed, and shot their victims, leaving wounds on the entire country.

“Overall, in 1919, economic, political, and social tensions caused 78 lynchings across the country. The *Defender* utilized these tensions to illustrate the necessity of equal rights,” it has been stated in one web site.

The *Chicago Defender* was the most successful and politically effective black newspaper ever printed. From its founding until 1925, it served as a voice for an entire race. The *Defender* stood up and demanded equality. Undeniably, the newspaper played an essential role in the history of blacks, Chicago, and of the United States. If not for this newspaper and its controversial writings, America might still be a place where segregation and discrimination were everyday occurrences. However, Robert S. Abbot had a sole purpose in founding the *Defender*, namely, to fight these injustices. Because of the *Chicago Defender* America is well on its way to becoming a country where equal rights prevail. [From *The Chicago Defender*. “Black-Press.”

<http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios/defender.html> (Dec. 14, 2004); *The Chicago*

Defender. "Chicago Defender." <<http://www.chicagodefender.com/history.html>> (Dec. 14, 2004); *The Chicago Defender*. "The Chicago Defender, A Newspaper Ahead of Its Time." <<http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/ihy011217.html>> (Dec. 14, 2004); Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago*; Dempsey J. Travis, *An Autobiography of Black Chicago*; Dempsey J. Travis, *An Autobiography of Black Politics*.]